

**STATEMENT OF**  
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**UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, FOREST**  
**SERVICE**

**Before the**  
**SENATE ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE**  
**SUBCOMMITTEE ON FORESTS AND PUBLIC LANDS**

**Regarding the July 4, 1999 blow-down in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area  
and other National Forest System Lands**

**July 7, 2000**

MR. CHAIRMAN:

We are pleased to be here to talk about the management of the national forests in Minnesota, in particular the activities taken in response to the storm of July 4, 1999. I am Don Meyer, Deputy Regional Forester for the Eastern Region of the Forest Service. I am accompanied today by Forest Supervisor James Sanders of the Superior National Forest and Forest Supervisor Logan Lee of the Chippewa National Forest.

I would like to express our appreciation to those members of the Minnesota delegation here today. They have provided unwavering support to the Chippewa and Superior National Forests and we welcome their interest.

Following the storm of July 4, 1999 the Forest Service took aggressive action to address public safety issues, to protect private property, to address resource issues and increase fire prevention and suppression response. We have completed a significant number of accomplishments and are planning additional work which I will discuss in more detail below.

## **FRAMEWORK FOR MANAGEMENT**

Before I get into more discussion on our response to the storm event, I want to talk about the collaborative context in which we manage the Superior and Chippewa National Forests. We collaborate with our State, local and private partners in many ways, including providing the Statewide fire suppression program at the Minnesota Interagency Fire Center, consulting with our partners on forest plan revisions and landscape planning efforts, and jointly delivering on-the-ground management.

In 1996, the Minnesota State Legislature established a collaborative Forest Resource Council through the Sustainable Forest Resource Act to advise the Governor in the management of the forested resources of the state. The Forest Resource Council is composed of 17 individuals, from all walks of life, with interests in management of the forest resources in the State of Minnesota. Jim Sanders serves on that Council and both forests are partners in the efforts. Both the Superior and Chippewa National Forests contributed to the development of and are applying Council-sponsored “Best Management Practices” and “Site-Level Forest Management Guidelines” to activities on National Forest System lands. Both forests also are engaged in regional landscape planning efforts sponsored by the Council. Those “Landscape Assessments” look at forest resources across boundaries and engage landowners in voluntary efforts to respond to broad scale issues and joint objectives. The Forest Resource Council, and related partnerships, set the framework for cooperation within Minnesota to address these issues.

## **THE STORM OF JULY 4**

The primary reason we are here today is to discuss Forest Service efforts in response to the storm of July 4, 1999. This storm consisted of extreme straight-line winds and heavy rains that resulted in significant impacts along the storm path.

On the Chippewa National Forest this storm followed a very wet spring, resulting in lake levels in the Mississippi Headwaters that were reflective of 500-year flood levels. Forty-six miles of trails were blocked by downed trees; thirteen miles of road were flooded, washed out, or damaged; nineteen campgrounds were damaged; 12,000 linear feet of shoreline on Cass Lake and Lake Winnibigoshish were damaged, threatening resorts, private homes, and recreation residences; Knutson Dam and breakwater experienced severe wave action damage; and approximately 6,000 acres had 30-90% of the trees blown down.

On the Superior National Forest the storm swept across the northern three counties (Cook, Lake and St. Louis), with the bulk of the storm's fury being felt in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. Initial efforts were focused on interagency search and rescue to assure that recreationists and residents were safe. In the two-day period following the storm there were more than 60 individuals reported with various injuries and 20 medical evacuations from the Boundary Waters. During the 15 days of search and rescue, initial damage inventories indicated that over 477,000 acres had 20-100% of trees blown down; 551 wilderness portages were blocked by blow-down; 350 miles of trail were blocked and unsafe; 1,520 wilderness campsites were impacted; six developed campgrounds were damaged; and 400 miles of roads impacted. The most dramatic effect from the storm is the accumulation of down, woody fuels anywhere from 3 to 20 feet deep.

By July 30, President Clinton issued a disaster declaration covering eight counties, including the seven counties common to the Chippewa and Superior National Forests.

Recovery efforts are dealing with immediate repair and restoration needs, many of which are oriented around public safety, access, and recreation use. Another concern is the longer term fire hazard. Although large fires are infrequent on these Forests, fires in the blow-down can be expected to burn at a higher prolonged intensity, with an increased spread rate at lower fire danger levels than experienced prior to the blow-down.

## **RECOVERY EFFORTS**

The Minnesota national forests have been very effective in responding to the storm. The priorities for our recovery efforts are: 1) health and safety, 2) infrastructure protection, and 3) resource protection. The Forest Service directed an additional \$5.5 million in funding to initiate recovery efforts in FY 1999. In addition, supplemental funding of \$2.0 million for FY 2000 has passed both houses of Congress.

A few of our major accomplishments include:

- 1) Evacuation of 20 injured individuals and completion of the search of 2,200 wilderness campsites in partnership with Cook, St. Louis and Lake Counties.

2) Clearing of 178 miles of trails and 551 wilderness portages, replacement of seven trail bridges, and clearing of 400 miles of roads.

3) Implementation of timber salvage and hazardous fuel treatments on 3,260 acres to address public safety concerns and reduce fire risk to private property in the Gunflint area. We utilized the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) emergency alternative arrangements approved by the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) to expedite this work.

4) Completion of the necessary environmental analysis to treat hazardous fuels on the remaining 4,700 acres in the Gunflint area.

5) Cooperative development of contingency plans among the general public, local units of government, and county, state and federal agencies to handle fire presuppression, suppression and evacuations.

In addition, other significant accomplishments include the following:

#### Initial Storm Recovery

- Emergency repair and reconstruction of 108 miles of roads to ensure safe public use;
- Removal of hazard trees and clearing of twenty five campgrounds, 1,520 wilderness campsites, and 218 miles of trails;
- Placement of 18,000 sandbags to protect structures, investments and critical habitat affected by shoreline damage.

#### Gunflint Trail Corridor Treatment

- Modification of existing timber sale contracts on 400 acres;
- Assistance in clean-up of 45 summer homes and resorts on the national forests.

#### Lake and Shoreline Protection

- Emergency inspection of Knutson Dam on the Mississippi River through agreement with the Corps of Engineers;
- Contract award for 6,700 feet of shoreline stabilization;
- Contract preparation for 3,000 feet of shoreline restoration.

#### Other Management Actions

- Modification of 37 ongoing timber sale contracts to allow operators to shift

their timber harvest operations to the blow-down areas without penalty to their existing timber sale contracts;

- Completion of fuels and fire risk assessment of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness by national experts.

#### Research Coordination

- Initiation of a research cooperative among North Central Research Station, the State of Minnesota, University of Minnesota, State and Private Forestry, and the Minnesota national forests to prioritize funding for research proposals related to the storm event.

While the accomplishments listed above are substantial, we intend to implement additional projects based on available funding. These projects include:

- Fuel treatments for blow-down areas outside the Gunflint Trail corridor with implementation starting this fall and winter.
- The use of prescribed fire in the Boundary Waters based on the ongoing analysis to develop burn options and detailed burning plans.
- Stabilization projects for an additional 2,300 feet of shoreline.
- Road reconstruction projects using Emergency Relief for Federally Owned (ERFO) roads funding
- Assessment of 50 archeological sites damaged by the storm event

The Forest Service has had to commit significant human resources in order to accomplish all of the above objectives. Eighteen law enforcement personnel and 75 Forest employees aided the counties in search and rescue efforts. It took 170 detailers from 18 states and 10 agencies to make trails, campsites, and portages in the Boundary Waters safe for public use. The forests have engaged 23 detailers from other forests to help with the development of environmental analyses. In addition, other ongoing forest programs such as timber management, forest plan revision, and recreation/wilderness management continue to be managed concurrently with ongoing storm recovery projects.

## **FIRE PREPAREDNESS**

The Minnesota national forests have worked hard to provide immediate and effective response to this storm event. In addition to fuel treatments already completed or in various stages of implementation, fire suppression planning has been underway since the storm event. Preparation for fire prevention, preparedness, and suppression in partnership with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and local governments has been extensive.

As I am sure you are aware, the State has primary responsibility for fire suppression on all state and privately owned lands. The blow-down, across the affected area, impacted National Forest System, State, County, private industrial, and private non-industrial lands. Because of the intermingled ownership and heavy fuel loads, this situation has provided a new complexity that has strengthened our partnership.

Under the guidance of the Minnesota Interagency Fire Center, and with the advice of national experts, task groups were established to help develop an interagency approach to this unique situation. The Minnesota State Legislature and Forest Service Washington Office provided additional resources to assure appropriate response to fire occurrence in Northern Minnesota.

Coordinated fire prevention messages, closures, communications, and management of suppression resources will maximize public and firefighter safety should a large fire occur. The Minnesota Department of Emergency Management (DEM) has been working with the counties and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to assure that evacuation plans and assistance protocols were in place prior to fire season.

## **CLOSING**

Mr. Chairman, we believe that the national forests in Minnesota have done a good job of setting priorities, accomplishing work, and serving the public with the resources available to them. Much of their success is based on partnerships with local, state, and tribal governments, as well as private interests. While it will be years before fuel reduction efforts are completed, we believe that through interagency cooperation we are providing public and natural resource protection.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. I would be happy to answer any questions you or the other Members might have.